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ABSTRACT

In view of the many and varied language problems in the typical Australian school, a general course in language studies is essential for all teachers. This paper attempts to suggest a basic orientation and a set of guiding principles for such a course. The content of a general language course is discussed in terms of what a teacher needs to know about language in order to facilitate language development in the students. Theoretical linguistics offers some insights, but because of the orientation of linguistic science, its applications to education are extremely limited. Certain linguistic principles are outlined that can be redeveloped in educationally relevant terms, and that concentrate on the nature of word and text. (Author/CFM)

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TRAINING TEACHERS TO MEET AUSTRALIA'S LANGUAGE NEEDS

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

An English teacher found that one of her first-formers could read only one-syllable words of three letters.
A mathematics teacher in her first year in schools was confronted by a class of twenty-five students of whom thirteen were non-native speakers of English and three knew no English whatsoever. A student teacher came to a colleague and me recently desperate for advice. She had to teach Eliot's The Wasteland to a class who hated poetry in general and Eliot in particular. A former student of ours who is now a careers officer in a technical school told me that he feels that the cause of most of the delinquency at the school is in some way or other linguistic. We asked a group of teachers to assess a piece of writing by a school child, and they rather sheepishly admitted that they had no idea how to assess writing.

These are a few fragments of the kaleidoscope of Australian education; they are all problems, and more specifically they are all language problems. That they are far from unusual in the experience of the Australian teacher is shown by the list of suggestions made by members of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English for study topics at a conference on "Language for Learning in a Multi-cultural Society". This teachers' eye view of the language situation in Australian schools includes the following:

> The fate of Anglo-Australian kids in bilingual programmes
> The schools' responsibility for creating language-learning contexts
> The consequences on a child's mental development of stressing a second language
> Teachers' language as a source of alienation in all subjects

... and so on, at considerable length.

The teacher in Australian schools is confronted by a frighteningly complicated array of demands upon his resources, and the solutions cannot be facilely provided by the trainer of teachers in a college of education. The linguistic problems must not be divorced from the political, social, and psychological situation, nor can even successful solutions be necessarily extended to analogous problems. Teaching is an intensely individual business, with intensely individual difficulties arising with each unique personality.

Nevertheless, we are concerned with equipping teachers with some understanding of language which will enable them the better to grapple with the demands of the classroom.

What does a teacher need to know about language that will inform his practice in the day-to-day business of the classroom? First, he needs certain perspectives:

> Language is the major means by which I make sense of the world.
>
> Language is the major means by which I share my experience with others and they with me.
>
> Language is the means by which I think.
>
> My language is therefore not only my means of constructing reality, both internal and external; it largely makes me what I am.

In more specific terms, he should be able to apply particular understandings to linguistic problems:

1) To understand the way in which language works in the processes of learning, in particular, how it functions in the classroom.

2) To appreciate the different processes involved in transacting meanings by speaking and listening, writing and reading.

3) To be aware of the problems of learning and using a second language.

4) To be aware of the ways in which language varies according to the relationships between the speaker/writer and his listener/reader and the stance of the speaker/writer towards what he is saying.

5) To assist his students to use language (both productively and receptively) to maximum efficiency, as a means of fully realising themselves.

6) To distinguish superficial mistakes in the use of language from those which evince deep-seated and therefore important failures in communication or thinking.

7) To investigate his own practice and the performance of his students as they are expressed in language.

8) To investigate the connexions between the four language skills of speaking and listening, writing and reading as they affect his students.

The teacher's training must include a problem-centred course in language study. The N.A.T.E. recommends that

> An . . . aspect of such a course should be a study of human communication; particularly the role of language in it, but also non-verbal communication. Because of the basic relationships between language and thought, language and learning, language and general development of the personality, we see this course as one for all teachers, not just those who are teaching English. . . The course would draw on psychology, sociology, and linguistics particularly, and would provide a unifying concept for, and might supersede, educational disciplines which exist uneasily in isolation at the initial training level. (1)

What specifically should this course contain?

Recent years have seen a plethora of writings giving teachers a vast range of information and advice on what to do in the classroom and how to do it, and one has the sense that, if most of the problems remain unsolved, the will and ability to solve them are to hand. The central tenet of this approach (one is almost tempted to forget Plato, Socrates, Locke, Spencer, Tolstoy, and many others and call it a new approach) is that the teacher is a facilitator of learning; for our purposes, a facilitator of language development, never a dispenser of immutable (and unintelligible) truths about good and bad grammar; he is more Plato's "midwife" than a linguistic pharmacist.
Watson suggests that

> the school's role in language development lies ... in aiding the development of the ability to handle the more abstract modes of discourse and the development of awareness both of the social context and the language itself. (2)

Britton (1977) sees the ideal school as a language workshop.

It is rare, however, to find real attempts to outline what a teacher needs to know about language in order to facilitate language development. Notice that the focus here is on what the teacher knows and applies, not what he teaches the students; there seems to be virtually no relationship between knowing about language and using it effectively and sensitively.

The obvious place to begin constructing a language curriculum for teachers in training would appear to be in linguistic theory, for linguisticsis, after all, the science of language. Yet this science, promising at first so much, has proved to be, educationally speaking, a broken cistern. After the halcyon days of early Transformational Grammar, disappointment has set in, and it is now common enough to read such jeremiads as the following:

> Linguistics has had a fairly long association with language teaching both in the U.K. and in the United States, but one is led to the conclusion that neither has served the other very well. (3)

or again,

> The conclusion is obvious - linguistics will not identify the tired phrase, the worn-out cliche, the overwritten sentence in a way that is helpful to the composition instructor, nor will it guide the student to the refreshing, the supremely right word, phrase, or metaphor. (4)

And, in case the point is not clear, let Harold Rosen's pugnacious comments sum it up:

> Over a decade, a certain disenchantment has set in . . . Our humility in the face of the awesome authority of linguistics began to be tempered by a critical awareness that it could tell us very little about some of our central concerns, and some alarm at the readiness of linguists to make pronouncements about schools and education. (5).

Why the failure? Why can a discipline which has told us so much about ourselves and the way we communicate not tell us how to teach in the face of daunting language difficulties?

There are probably many reasons, and there is no room here for a discussion of them, but the most fundamental reason, one which is a great hurdle for all who seek to apply linguistics to social problems, is that the fundemental questions behind linguistic theory are not those behind teaching theory, with the result that answers provided by linguistics are couched in educationally irrelevant terms. Associated with this fact is the difference in standpoints: linguistics strives, as a science, to be value-free and non-prescriptive, whereas the business of teaching is preeminently a trafficking in values. We look to the teacher to guide students into an awareness of good and bad, suitable and unsuitable, in language use as well as in all other areas of a complete education. We search in our speech for the <u>mot juste</u>; the linguist has to be content with describing after the event what word we chose.

Not only so, but the time required to train a person to proficiency in using any of the major methods of linguistic analysis is considerable and the life of the trainee teacher is too short for such prodigality, regardless of whether the returns in the form of improved classroom practice are noticeable or not. Britton writes that the sort of abstract theorising associated with disciplines like linguistics, which the teacher operates "lies somewhere between that of the psychological thinking of a psychologist and the reasoning that same psychologist brings to solving his daily problems".(6) Donald Macaulay summarises:

> The teacher of English, therefore, cannot be expected to master the field (of linguistics). . . and should not seek to do so . . . But, at the same time, he should not ignore it. There is no reason why he should not try to absorb as much of it as will assist him, for example, in evaluating classroom materials and methods which are presented to him under the blanket description "linguistic". (7)

We are now faced with deciding exactly what it is of linguistic theory which will assist our teacher by equipping him with the perspectives and abilities mentioned above.

Two of the broad insights of modern linguistics are crucial for the teacher. The first is that language is a rule-governed system in all of its manifestations, which means among other things that failures in using language effectively must be systematic evidence of the causes of the failure, and not simply laziness or naughtiness on the pupils' part. Mistakes or weaknesses may, for instance, be caused by interference from another language in the English of a non-native speaker; they may reveal inadequate thinking or understanding or perhaps be the result of a pupil's non-standard dialect, and so on. How important this perspective is for the teacher! The cane is a very poor facilitator of language.

The second important view comes from the social theories which view language as a set of meaning options, the nature of which is determined by the social and cultural context as well as by the language itself. Whenever we use language, we go directly through the structures to the meaning of a text, and teaching English is, to adopt Halliday's terms, a process of helping students to learn how to mean. The empty prescriptiveness of the old guard grammarians arises largely from an excessive focus on structure. The teacher must view language as not good or bad in the sense that split infinitives are sinful but as appropriate or inappropriate in the sense that to injudiciously and without regard for intelligibility or conciseness split infinitives may

weaken the effect of one's exchanging of meanings.

Within these perspectives, the teacher needs tools of analysis for all sorts of purposes. If we want our teachers to be investigators of their own practice, we must give them the means of examining corpora of real language.

An ideal starting-point for a relevant course in language study is the word. It is here that the average man in the loungeroom is least linguistically unaware. Most people regard words as the building-blocks of which they construct their conversations and letters; we all do crossword puzzles, play interminable games of Scrabble, and self-consciously invent new words; we often say, "I can't find the right word", rarely "I can't find the right means of combining words.". A sense of what is and what is not a word develops very early in children.

Saussure made (among many others) three cogent points about words (or, strictly speaking, linguistic units):

i) The word is an arbitrary, mutually-defining pairing of sound and meaning. The word refers to something "out there" in the world.

ii) The word is a powerful carrier of associations, and stands at the centre of a web of meanings arising from the speaker's shared or unique experience. It refers to something "in here" within the speaker.

iii) The word means what it does partly because of what is excludes, what it doesn't mean.

An understanding of the role of language in thinking, of style, and particularly the language of poetry is centred on these three tenetes.

Words are classified in language, not just by nitpicking grammarians, but by all users. One of the crudest and yet most enlightening classifications of words is that into the lexically dense, meaning-heavy words and the organising words. From the former comes the meat of a communication, the substance of the topic, and from the latter much of the speaker's attitude towards what he is talking about, and the relationships of the elements of his topic to one another.

The meaning-heavy words can further be classified to reveal some significant materials for study, and the traditional concepts of noun, verb, and so on are quite adequate for these purposes. Working with our students, we have discovered some important features of the way in which the use and placing of these word-classes conveys attitudes, particularly the type and proportion of adjectives, the modal and auxilliary verbs, and the transitivity of verbs. The traditional adverbial and adjectival phrases can also be profitably explored in this way.

The combining of words into sentences is an area in which the teacher needs a particular understanding; he should be sensitive to the possibilities and limitations of the English sentence if he is to improve students' reading and writing. Our students have found phrase-structure trees and sentence-level matrices invaluable in focusing on how meanings are conveyed. Typically, ineffective writing by schoolchildren is the result of the inadequate use of embedding and coordinating: sentences often convey too little or too much information for the reader. Sentence-level analysis of this type can reveal a great deal about the writer's patterns of thinking, and this is important when one is trying to discover whether weaknesses in a written text are due to pupils' lack of understanding of the subject matter or an inability to handle the medium (or both).

At the level of constructing a discourse (written or spoken), work is still in its infancy. Teachers need an understanding of the processes of constructing narratives, didactic texts, propoganda, and so on, and the different abilities required of the different forms. Far too little research has been done in this field; Britton's function categories are an excellent starting-point, but they are limited to the written language, and they lack linguistic components. The work by Labov on displaceable clauses and Halliday and Hasan's examination of cohesion offer exciting prospects, and tagmemic discourse-level analysis may well have some principles to offer the teacher.

Finally, the teacher must be sufficiently aware of the viewpoints and methods of the mainline linguistic theories, particularly transformational grammar and systemics, as well as traditional grammar, and their use in applied fields, to be able to read intelligently the education publications within these frameworks. The knowledge required, of course, is rather low-level and general, and does not extend to the teacher's being able himself to use the methods of analysis (after all, having studied the course outlined above, he has his own). It is also desirable for him to be familiar with the works of the major thinkers about language who do not develop their own linguistic theories.

It is our belief that the type of language knowledge outlined in this paper is an invaluable element of a teacher's training, and should eventually become a component of the studies of not only English teachers, but teachers of all subjects in Australia.

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